

Give Me Some Slack



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Two of my buddies went on an evening-tide dive, which I couldn't make. When they got back, they told me this story, and I want to pass to anyone else who dives from a small boat.

It was a normal Whidbey Island day in May at Deception Pass, a channel at the northern end of the island. The Ling cod season was at its peak.

Anyone familiar with this area will tell you that the tides in Deception Pass are some of the most extreme in the U.S. Tide exchanges range from 2 to 16 feet, and currents run in excess of 18 knots.

My friends were in a 14-foot aluminum boat, and arrived at the dive site a half-hour before slack tide to watch the kelp. They dropped anchor and continued to watch for the current to slacken. When it did, both divers entered the water for what they assumed would be an uneventful dive.

When they returned to the surface, they noticed their boat was gone, so they swam to nearby rocks in the center of Deception Pass. From there, they spotted their boat drifting in the current into the Puget Sound. Unable to wave down a passing boat to help them, they took off their heavy Scuba gear and swam for the boat with the outgoing tide. After 40 minutes of exhaustive swimming, they finally reached the boat.

Catching their breath, they set out to determine what set their boat adrift. They saw that the anchor rope was still attached to the boat, and the anchor was attached to the rope. They realized they hadn't given the rope enough slack to compensate for the change in tide.

During the last 20 minutes of a current run, the tide can rise more than a foot or two. When the tide came in and the level of the water rose, the anchor was lifted off the bottom, and the boat floated away.

The lesson learned here is when anchoring a boat, no matter where, always give extra slack to allow for tide and current movement. Even a wave from another boat can pull an anchor off the bottom and allow a boat to drift away.

According to Coast Guard standards, anchor ropes should be at a 45-degree angle from the boat. *[Note: In small-boat classes, you learn that you should have 7 feet of anchor rope for every foot of water you're anchoring in. You may want to have even more rope in strong winds or currents.—Ed.]*

The Coast Guard's boater-safety courses explain all this. Sign up for one; it can save you a lot of headaches and keep you from chasing your boat all over the place. 

The author is a PADI dive master with more than 250 dives at Deception Pass.